DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 346 978 PS 020 594

TITLE Family Friends: Heart Medicine Money Can't Buy.
INSTITUTION National Council on the Aging, Inc., Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, New Brunswick, N.J.
PUB DATE 92
NOTE 16p.; For related documents, see PS 020 591-593.
AVAILABLE FROM National Council on the Aging, Inc., 409 Third Street, S.W., Washington, DC 20024 (free).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Chronic Illness; *Disabilities; Family Problems; Family Programs; Helping Relationship; Home Visits; *Intergenerational Programs; Middle Aged Adults; *Older Adults; Program Descriptions; Social Support Groups; *Volunteers; Volunteer Training; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS Adult Child Relationship; *Family Friends Program

ABSTRACT

In 1986, the National Council on Aging developed the Family Friends program, which brings older people into the homes of children with disabilities and chronic illnesses. Charter programs were implemented in eight cities. These programs are still operating, and programs in other cities are in various stages of development. Since 1989, Family Friends has diversified to serve the rural poor and homeless people. In 1991, a total of 1,200 senior volunteers were matched with participating families. The volunteer provides social and emotional support to the family and child; tutors the child; takes the child on recreational outings; serves as an advocate and a source of information for the family; teaches the child self-help skills; and provides child care relief for parents. Each local program has: (1) a project director, who is a trained professional with experience with "medically fragile" children and their families; (2) an advisory committee of community leaders, health professionals, and parents; (3) volunteers; and (4) participating children and families. Establishing a Family Friends program involves recruiting, training, and supervising volunteers; selecting families to participate in the program; matching volunteers and children; scheduling visits of volunteers to families; fundraising; and promoting and evaluating the program. A list of local Family Friends programs is appended. (BC)

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Family Friends

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON THE AGING

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"This is a heart medicine that cannot be bought. I wish I could share my good feelings with others."

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Family Friends

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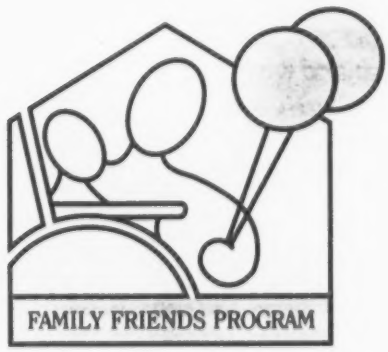
Heart Medicine Money Can't Buy



Family Friends:

Heart
Medicine
More
Can't Buy

Two afternoons a week, Addie sets out from home to catch a crosstown bus, over her shoulder a tote bag filled with small toys, games, and—sometimes—a treat or two. Those same mornings, on the other side of town, a young mother named Sarah and her son Josh wait with eager anticipation for Addie's arrival.

Addie is a Family Friend to Josh, Sarah, and her husband Will. Since birth, eight-year-old Josh has been physically limited by the effects of multiple disabilities. Although his parents have willingly and lovingly cared for him at home, they have often felt pangs of desperation and frustration, brought on by the constant care that Josh requires.

Often, that is, until they found their Family Friend. "Addie is the first good thing that's happened to us in six years," says Will.

Addie is thrilled, too. Her own children and grandchildren live thousands of miles away, and she seldom has a chance to visit or play with them. Widowed, Addie often finds herself feeling lonely. Before she knew Josh and his family, she felt sorry for herself at times. But not anymore!

"I'm just delighted with my new little friend," she tells her Family Friends project director. "He became my friend immediately, and his mother can use me as a sounding board. I can reassure her that things aren't as bad as some people are telling her they are."

The lives of these four changed forever—for the better—the day they learned about Family Friends, a dynamic national program from The National Council on the Aging (NCOA) that brings older people into the homes of children with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Family Friends are more than babysitters; they're true caregivers, offering themselves and their time to make the world more pleasant for children and parents.

All across the nation, mature, caring men and women like Addie are volunteering to help families in crisis by becoming Family Friends. This intergenerational program succeeds by helping every person it touches:

- **Chronically ill and disabled kids —** from infants to 12-year-olds—receive physical care, self-help instruction, and human warmth from their new grandmas and grandpas.

• **Volunteers** aged 55 and older give physical assistance and nurturing to those who desperately need it and are, in turn, rewarded with a sense of personal pride and genuine affection for their "new families."

• **Parents** of these children are given encouragement and respite—the intangibles they need to carry on—by their new family friends.

• **The community** is strengthened by this cost-effective base of citizens giving supportive services to other citizens. People learn to rely on each other, to connect with an "extended family" in an era marked by so many disconnected biological families.

• **The sponsoring organization** enhances its visibility throughout the community. As more and more people learn about Family Friends, they become aware of the community-based nonprofit organizations which support it.

Every person involved at each level of this tri-generational progam gives and receives—friendship—at a time in life when each one needs it to survive.

BACKGROUND OF FAMILY FRIENDS

The Family Friends program began in 1986, when it was developed by NCOA and first funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a philanthropical organization devoted to improving the nation's health care. Originally, NCOA received funds to develop and implement programs in eight cities: Los Angeles, Hartford, Washington, D.C., Miami, Omaha, Cleveland, San Antonio, and Salt Lake City. Today, those charter programs are still operating, and others are in the developmental stages. Kansas City, Missouri, has a Family Friends program funded by a local foundation.

In March 1989, First Lady Barbara Bush praised the work of Family Friends, calling it an exceptional private sector volunteer program. She gave national recognition to this volunteer work during a White House reception when the families, volunteers, children, and community supporters met with her.

Just one month later, The National Council on the Aging brought together many key leaders in the U.S. Congress to discuss ways to increase the public's awareness of Family Friends and establish more local programs. As a result of NCOA's public education efforts, the Congress voted appropriations in 1990 to expand Family Friends to new communities.

In 1989, Family Friends diversified by helping another at-risk group, the rural poor. Under the Rural Family Friends umbrella, pilot programs were established in four West Virginia communities.

Over the years, in a continuing effort to identify and help populations with special needs, the Family Friends concept has also been introduced into shelters for the homeless in Baltimore, Milwaukee, and Dallas.

The national Family Friends program continues to grow in number of matched volunteers and families—from 300 in 1987 to 1200 in 1991. Three years of program success have encouraged local program directors to more assertively recruit volunteers and match them to needy families. Familiarity with Family Friends spread throughout the community. The projects expanded beyond their original boundaries to serve persons in outlying towns.

A Family Friend is a godsend... who comes once a week to lift your spirits and brighten your day.

"She'll make him do what he has to do; she's strict and loving at the same time," says the mother of Danny about Mary Johnson, their Family Friend. "He kind of fell in love with her, and I think she feels the same way about him."

WHAT A FAMILY FRIEND IS

A Family Friend is a caring older person—listener, talker, storyteller, teacher, mentor, caregiver. A Family Friend is—at various times—supportive, empathetic, optimistic, curious, informative, helpful, cheerful, or sad. A Family Friend is there when you need a shoulder to lean on.

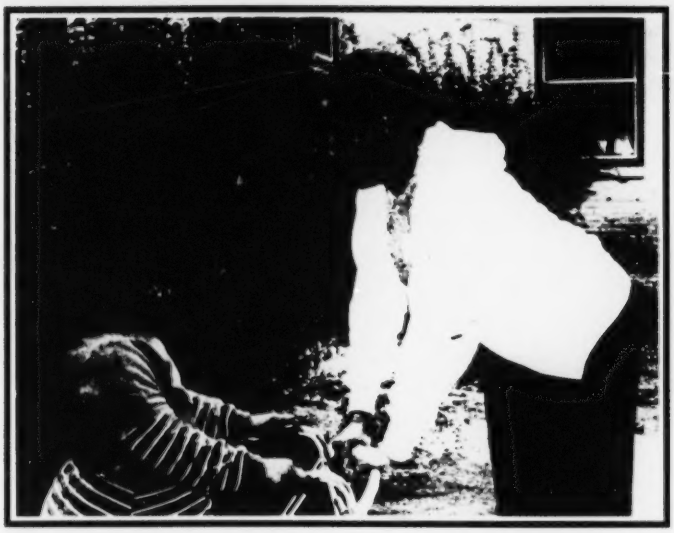
A Family Friend becomes a surrogate grandparent to the child, siblings, and parents. Older people have their own unique wealth of experience to share with a family who welcomes them. Family Friends—men and women—come from a variety of backgrounds. Often they have fewer demands on their time than younger persons. Many have already raised their own families and remember those times fondly. In some cases, they have personal experience dealing with physical limitations, grief, and the social aspects of those hardships.

They enjoy helping the families with whom they are matched, and they feel their own lives are enriched by the part they play in making Family Friends such a successful program.

One volunteer said it this way:

Nothing can replace the good feelings I receive from being a Family Friend and from the association with other volunteers. This is a heart medicine that cannot be bought. I wish I could do more or share my good feelings with others.

"Nothing can replace the good feelings I receive from being a Family Friend."



Helen Devor, 66, of Los Angeles, calls the two children she visits her "grandchildren." She takes the little boys for walks, talks with them, reads to them, and plays games with them. In getting to know the family, she says, "I have learned a lot about myself. And I have learned to be a better grandparent to my own grandchildren."

WHAT A FAMILY FRIEND DOES

A Family Friend is trained to find the best way to help the family. At different times, depending on the child's development, a Family Friend may read aloud, play games, draw or paint, listen to music, dance, swim, sew—or even help the child perform light household chores like making a bed or setting the table. Sometimes a Family Friend takes the child for a walk, sits with him in a rocking chair, or even visits him at school to help with classwork.

Help from a Family Friend usually comes in the form of

- **social and emotional support**, such as talking and listening, lay counseling, comforting, advising, and just plain friendship;
- **tutoring**, such as help with homework exercises, repetitive practice, and structured learning;
- **recreational assistance**, such as taking the child to cultural and recreational events to participate in the arts, athletics, and other leisure activities, including scouting, Special Olympics, and similar programs;
- **advocacy**, when the Family Friend serves as a "case coordinator" and speaks on behalf of the family to the various professionals who plan and manage the child's care. Sometimes the Family Friend talks to parents about nutrition, hygiene, or community services available to them. At other times, the Family Friend calls on community groups to provide voluntary

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services, such as transportation, or goods, such as toys, to help families in need;

• **providing personal care skills and self-help**, when a Family Friend—in the course of other activities—washes, feeds, toilets, and dresses the child. Family Friends use these times as a chance to teach the child how to help himself, depending on his developmental level;

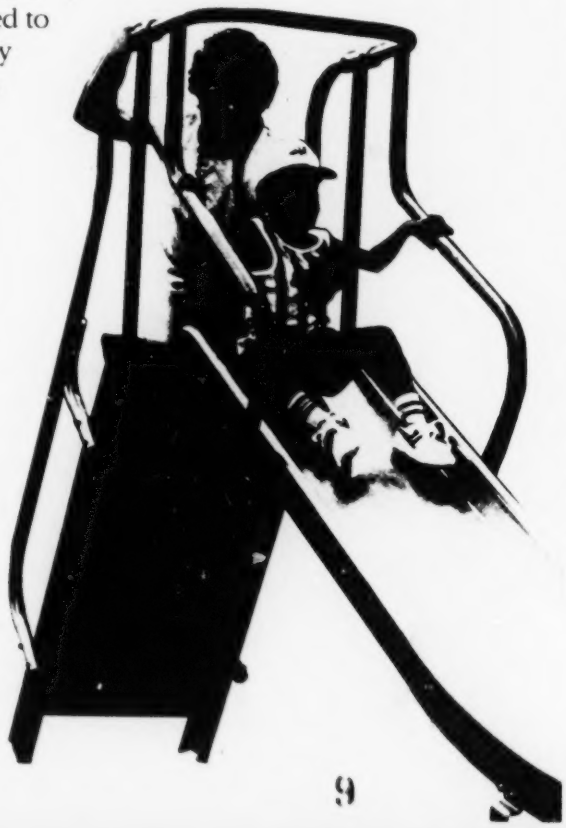
• **giving respite to weary parents**, so they can run errands, tend to their other children, go shopping—or just get away for a few welcome hours. Respite is provided only when both volunteer and parent request it, and only when the child is medically stable—unlikely to suffer apnea, cardiac arrest, or other medical crises. Respite care is limited to half the total time the Family Friend spends in the child's home.

In short, Family Friends do what all good friends do—they're there, and they care!

HOW THE PROGRAM OPERATES

If you are considering becoming a Family Friends volunteer, you should know how a local program is organized. Family Friends programs are currently operating in eight U.S. cities, with technical assistance from The National Council on the Aging.

Project Director. Each local project is staffed by a trained professional who has clinical experience with medically fragile children and their families. The project director recruits and supervises the volunteers, who are asked to make an initial nine-month commitment to the program. Although they are volunteers, these Family Friends do receive stipends to cover expenses such as supplies, meals, and reimbursement for transportation.



The project director supervises the volunteers, who work in private homes. At the same time, the director offers one-to-one counseling and assistance to the volunteer and the parents of children in the program.

The project director is also responsible for implementing the program, recruiting volunteers and families, matching volunteers and families, managing the budget, interacting with the local advisory committee, fundraising, and undertaking local public relations and publicity activities. Other staff members may include a volunteer coordinator, a community liaison, and a support person.

Advisory Committee. Local programs operate with the guidance of a community-based advisory committee—composed of community leaders with experience in voluntary fundraising—along with a network of physicians, educators, social workers, nurses, gerontologists, and parents of chronically ill children. This committee also provides personal contacts through whom volunteers and children/families are found and fundraising is accomplished.

An involved advisory committee often serves as a catalyst, helping the project director get a program off the ground quickly and effectively.

Volunteers. The Family Friends Program looks for volunteers who are mature (at least 55 years of age), caring, emotionally stable, and optimistic. Ideally, a volunteer has previous experience with young children, either as a parent or as a professional. Useful—but not required—is a background in health care, education, and volunteer work.

Children and families. The children range in age from infancy to twelve years. Although they are usually referred by physicians, hospital staff, or education and social service professionals, at times they are referred by their parents.

Many of the children have multiple physical handicaps, and some are mentally retarded. They have been diagnosed with a variety of disabilities such as seizures, cerebral palsy, autism, or spina bifida. Many of the preschool children who are too young to be officially identified as mentally retarded are developmentally delayed. Many are nonverbal and need assistance to walk.

Often Family Friends work as diligently with an entire family as they do with the child. Many of the households are impoverished or unstable, with parents who need as much direction and support as their children.

ESTABLISHING A FAMILY FRIENDS PROGRAM

If you or your organization is considering establishing a local Family Friends program, you should know what its basic components are.

- **Recruiting volunteers** starts with the personal touch—one-on-one recruitment, a volunteer nominating a friend or relative.

Recruitment techniques vary from one place to another. Often volunteers are found by publicizing the program through brochures, newspaper articles, senior center newsletters, church or synagogue bulletins, personal appearances at seniors' clubs and housing locations, word-of-mouth, and pre-retirement programs sponsored by employers.

Volunteers receive recognition during a special ceremony each year. In addition, many programs sponsor a holiday party during the winter and a summertime picnic or outing.

- **Training of volunteers** is typically provided by local program staff with the help of faculty from area universities, pediatric hospitals, social work agencies, aging organizations, and community people well versed in the health professions.

The training of a volunteer is comprehensive and designed to minimize anxiety. Classroom instruction consists of a 60-hour course covering fundamental child development, family dynamics, and special medical and psychosocial needs of the children and

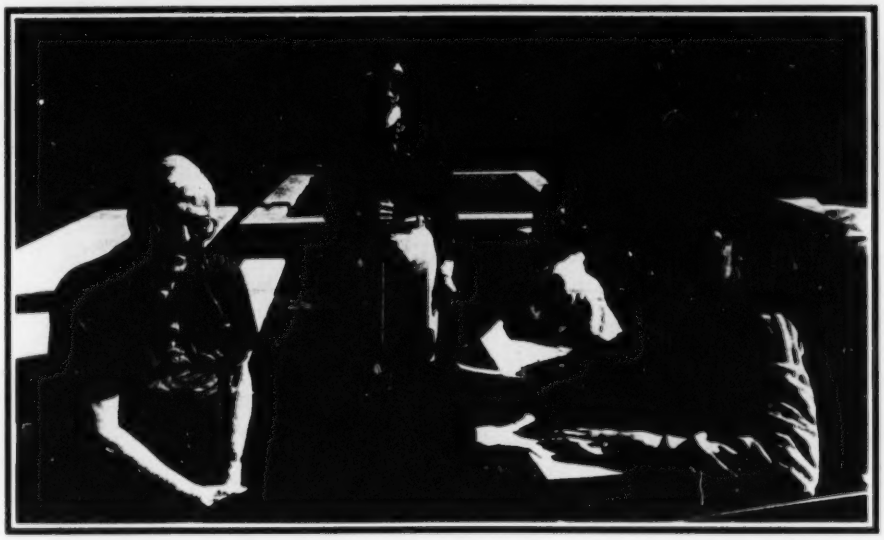
Our most effective recruitment has been personal, as in the case of Arthur, a Family Friend to Damon. Repeatedly, Arthur came home after a visit with Damon filled with stories of their time together. Curiosity soon brought Arthur's wife, Elizabeth, to the next meeting of volunteers. There she found herself drawn into the program out of a sense of being able to help someone who really needed her.

What does the program mean to me? It fulfills my need to be needed. It has given me a feeling of accomplishment.

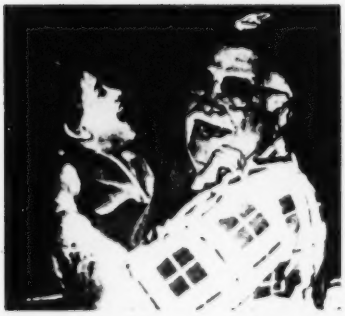
their families, as well as basic first aid, emergency procedures, and an introduction to the special devices (wheelchairs, braces, etc.) used by children with handicaps.

Volunteers have a chance to work with the youngsters in a supervised setting—usually at a pediatric treatment center or similar clinical site. The volunteers then meet monthly with Family Friends staff members to discuss their reactions to the children. These sessions evolve into a necessary and valuable support group for the volunteers.

• **The selection of a Family Friends volunteer** includes an hour-long interview covering personal and employment history, relationship with other family members, involvement in other organizations, personal interests, motivations for becoming a Family Friend, and general morale and outlook on life. The interview also focuses on disciplinary practices, history of any crime, mental illness, or substance abuse. Later, an "age-appropriate" physical examination screens for communicable diseases or problems that would limit the volunteer's participation in the program.



Dave Barton is a Family Friend to Jordan, a 12-year-old with cerebral palsy. Thanks to Dave's help, Jordan can attend public school because Dave "becomes" Jordan's body. They go to school together, and Dave's there to help with physical therapy before the classroom day begins. As Dave puts it, "It's better than playing golf!" As Jordan's mother puts it, "He does it so willingly and so often—I just can't believe how much he does for us all."



• **The selection of families** is conducted through home visits from the Family Friends staff. Like volunteers, parents are interviewed about medical histories, current educational and health care services used, family needs and resources, and specific areas in which the Family Friend can be most helpful. At the same time, the staff member can assess the family's interpersonal situation in order to make the best volunteer match possible.

• **Matching volunteers and children** is done quickly and carefully to increase the likelihood that a positive relationship will develop. Family Friends and families are matched according to the information gained during all the previous interviews, taking into consideration the volunteer's ability to travel to and from the child's home. Proximity is considered first, followed by personal styles and needs, any handicaps or special health conditions of the volunteer, schedules, language barriers, and personalities.

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A wonderful new wise and caring friend to learn from and look up to

During one visit, Family Friend Mimi found Baby Daniella crying, apparently from hunger. Wondering why Daniella's mother had not fed her, Mimi soon discovered an empty refrigerator. After she informed the staff about the family's cash flow problem, several volunteers took up a collection to get food for the baby to get her through a particularly rough time.

• **Visits** are scheduled by Family Friends and parents for times that are mutually convenient. Each visit lasts from two to four hours, and there are usually at least two visits per week. Most of the children are enrolled in some type of educational program during the day, so Family Friends often visit in the afternoon, early evening, or on weekends. Some volunteers also visit the school classroom to help their child with assignments.

• **Continuing supervision of volunteers** takes place when they meet monthly—in small groups when feasible—to discuss their experiences and exchange ideas and advice. In addition, each Family Friend meets monthly with a staff member to resolve any special situations that may have arisen.

• **Fundraising** is the key to success for every Family Friends program and is the common thread running throughout activities to garner community support, public relations, and promotion. Technical assistance—"how-to" help—in fundraising is available from NCOA. However, actual financial development takes place at the local level, where the community can see first-hand the benefits of a Family Friends program.

Local funding comes from a combination of sources, such as private foundations, corporations, state and county social agencies, and individuals. Often funds are also raised from community events such as fairs, luncheons, dinners, theater parties, direct mail, and personal contact.

Community support and fundraising come through personal networking, advocacy, and public education. A community-based advisory committee is formed of individuals with previous experience in volunteer or professional fundraising. This committee expands community support and helps identify potential sources of cash and human capital. The major consideration in choosing committee members is to involve people who know how to design, launch, maintain, and nurture the project.

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Help is also sought from leaders of community-based organizations with an interest in chronically ill and disabled children and from those who may be sources of older volunteers. Co-sponsorship with another organization is effective because it expands the resources and constituencies available to the program.

A letter-writing advocacy campaign to elected officials alerts them to the cost-effective benefits of Family Friends and doubles as a fundraising activity.

• **Promotion of the program** consists of carrying out a public relations campaign to publicize the project, raise funds, and help recruit families and volunteers. A publicity campaign increases the public's awareness of the program and its benefit to the community. The public relations campaign is also an important arm of the fundraising activities.

The campaign—as simple or complex as resources allow—might include an informational brochure, press release, public service announcement, human interest story for the local newspaper, article for the newsletters of community-based organizations, personal appearances to groups of potential volunteers, special events to attract media attention, and participation in special community events for older adults.

Evaluation of the program allows the staff and advisory committee to identify strengths and areas for future improvement. Evaluations are based on reactions gained from volunteers and families regarding all aspects of the project. Results are cycled back into the planning process to help make such decisions as whether to continue the project, expand it, or change the approach.

HELP AVAILABLE FROM NCOA

NCOA's Family Friends Resource Center offers materials and technical assistance each step of the way to help you as you establish and expand your program. NCOA provides training consultation, publications, a detailed working guide for planning and operating a Family Friends project, audio visual materials, assistance with staff development, operational planning and implementation, fundraising, and all other aspects of developing a successful Family Friends program.

THE HEART MEDICINE MONEY CAN'T BUY

A young mother in Hartford captures the true spirit of the Family Friends program when she writes:

If I had the authority to nominate any individual for a Nobel Peace prize, it would be my volunteer. I just hope and pray that she lives a thousand years and keeps showering us with her love, affection, and caring. Thank you, Family Friends.

If you would like to become a Family Friend—or set up a Family Friends project in your community—call or write:

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* Funded by the United Way of Millburn Short Hills
** Funded by the Administration on Aging Department of Health and Human Services
*** Funded by the Prudential Foundation AT&T Foundation

The National Council on the Aging, Inc. wishes to acknowledge the financial support provided to the Family Friends Resource Center for the dissemination of educational information about this program. *Family Friends: Heart Medicine Money Can't Buy* has been published with the assistance of these funders:

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
Princeton, New Jersey

ARCO Foundation
Los Angeles, California

Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.
Des Moines, Iowa

Sunsweet Growers, Inc.
Yuba City, California

Ogilvy Adams & Rinehart
Washington, D.C.

THE NATIONAL COUNCIL ON THE AGING, INC., established in 1950, is the national organization for professionals and volunteers who work to improve the quality of life for older Americans. Intergenerational programming has been a major focus at NCOA. It enhances the understanding of how Americans—of all ages—can work together to help bring some relief to families facing formidable responsibilities. NCOA also serves as a national resource for information, training, technical assistance, advocacy, and research on every aspect of aging.

THE ROBERT WOOD JOHNSON FOUNDATION of Princeton, New Jersey, is one of the nation's largest private philanthropic organizations and is devoted to improving the nation's health care through a grant-giving program amounting to approximately $160 million annually. In 1986 the Foundation awarded grants to underwrite Family Friends projects in eight cities across America. The program is designed to demonstrate ways in which older volunteers can work effectively with children who are chronically ill or disabled. A grant was also awarded to **The National Council on the Aging** to provide technical assistance and direction for the program. More recently, the Foundation awarded a grant to NCOA to disseminate information about Family Friends through public education.

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